

**Confessing the Office of the Holy Ministry With the General Royal
Priesthood As Christ's Gifts in the World**

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INTRODUCTION

When our Lord Jesus Christ ascended on high to fill all things He gave gifts to men (Ephesians 4:8). This is joyfully confessed in the second paragraph of “The Order for the Ordination of a Minister” given in the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference’s *The Lutheran Agenda*:

And when He had ascended far above all heavens, that He might fill all things, He gave unto His Church [here my own ordinator on Sunday, July 18, 1982 fortuitously added the words: “as His gifts”!] some, Apostles, and some, Prophets, and some, Evangelists, and some, pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints, [helpful comma!] for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.¹

This passage of Scripture read at the advent of a Christian man into the office of the Holy Ministry characterizes what this man is and will do as long as he is in this office: he is a gift to the Church and he is given to deliver the Lord’s gifts to the Church. This is declared in the words the ordinator speaks over the ordinand as the office is committed to him:

The Lord pour out upon thee His Holy Spirit for the office and the work committed unto thee by the call, that thou mayest be a faithful dispenser of the means of grace. Amen.²

The final words spoken to the ordinand declare this as well:

The Lord bless thee from on high and make thee a blessing unto many, that thou mayest bring forth fruit, and that thy fruit may remain unto eternal life. Amen.

It will be the aim of this study to confess and rejoice in the Lord’s gifts that establish, characterize, and constitute His Church. Most particularly, two important gifts will be studied: the office of the Holy Ministry and the general Priesthood of the baptized. When these two gifts are not confessed as they are given by the Lord doubt is introduced in the receiving of Christ’s gift of forgiveness of sins and eternal life through the means of

¹*The Lutheran Agenda: Authorized by the Synods Constituting the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, n.d.), 104.

²*Ibidem*, 107.

grace. With that in mind it will be the aim of this study to dispel doubt by thinking carefully through the distinction of these two gifts of the Lord. From the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions this study will seek to confess these two gifts as the Lord has given them.

A DISTINCTION DISPUTED

There is disagreement in the Lutheran Church concerning the distinction between the office of the Holy Ministry and the general Priesthood of the baptized. This is concisely and straightforwardly stated by the sainted Dr. Arthur Carl Piepkorn in his helpful contribution to the Lutherans and Catholics in dialogue:

In the course of the confessional revival in the Church of the Augsburg Confession during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Lutheran theologians interpreted the statements of the symbolical books about the sacred ministry in three typical ways.

Stated in an extreme form, the first view holds that the sacred ministry is only the activity of the universal royal priesthood of believers, the public exercise of which the Christian community has solemnly committed to certain persons merely for the sake of good order and efficiency. At the opposite extreme is the position which sees the sacred ministry as the contemporary form of the primitive apostolate and as the personal representation of Christ. A third view occupies the middle ground between these two positions and incorporates elements of both. It sees the sacred ministry as a divine institution that is essential to the church's existence. It regards the responsible public proclamation and application of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments as the primary content of the sacred ministry. It looks upon ordination as the indispensable act of admission to the sacred ministry.³

As the distinction between the general Priesthood and the office of the Holy Ministry is discussed this difference of opinion should be noted. Oftentimes this difference is the result of misinterpretations of the theology of Martin Luther on the topic. Dr.

³Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "The Sacred Ministry and Holy Ordination in the Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church," in *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue IV: Eucharist and Ministry*, U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation and the Bishop's Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (n.p.: by the authors, 1970), 101.

Luther's body of work is known for its lack of consistent theological systemization. Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that

[Luther] is no "systematician" in the scholastic sense, and he is no dogmatician—either in the sense of the great medieval systems or in the sense of modern theology. He wrote neither a dogmatics, nor an ethics, nor a *Summa*⁴

Despite this it can be said of Luther on this subject by an eminent interpreter:

Luther's congregational principle can in itself no more be played off against the office of administration (*Leitungsamt*) than can the priesthood of all believers against the office of the ministry (*Predigtamt*).⁵

This will be a guiding presupposition in this study that will prove helpful in discussing the differing opinions. However, it can be candidly stated that Dr. Luther is a guide in understanding the distinction between the Priesthood and the Ministry, but ultimately the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions must be the authoritative sources for the doctrine of each.

THE DOMINICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE TWO DOCTRINES

Dr. C.F.W. Walther is helpful in placing the two doctrines of Ministry and Priesthood in dominical perspective. It is clear that he is not a "Functionalist." His first thesis on the Office of the Holy Ministry states clearly: "The Holy Preaching Office or Parish Office is an office distinct from the Office of Priest, which all believers have."⁶ He supports his statement with the scriptural passages which speak of the universal

⁴Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schulz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 3.

⁵Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521-1532*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 69-70.

⁶"Das heilige Predigtamt oder Pfarramt ist ein von dem Priesteramt, welches all Gläubigen haben, verschiedenes Amt." C.F.W. Walther, *Die Stimme unserer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt* (Erlangen: Verlag von Andreas Deichert, 1875), 174.

Priesthood (1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6, 5:10) and then with passages that show that not all priests hold the office of the Holy Ministry in the Church:

Although it is attested to us in the Holy Scriptures that all believing Christians are priests . . . , it is expressly taught us conjointly in them that there is in the Church an office to teach, to shepherd, to manage, etc., which Christians do not have by virtue of their general Christian calling. For it also stands written: “Are they all apostles? Are they all prophets? Are they all teachers?” etc. (1 Cor. 12, 29.) “How, indeed, should they preach, if they are not sent?” (Rom. 10, 15.) “Dear brothers, let not everyone attempt to be a teacher, and know that we will receive so much the more judgment.” (Jam. 3, 1.)⁷

He then cites Augustana 14 in its entirety as the witness of the Church in its public Confessions.⁸

These Lutheran Confessions, which have been aptly characterized as “the obligatory model of all of the church’s preaching and teaching,”⁹ are therefore an authoritative guide for the Christian in confessing the two gifts of Ministry and Priesthood. Even as they distinguish Ministry from Priesthood they also order them as follows: the Augsburg Confession presents the office of the Holy Ministry (*Predigtamt/ministerium docendi evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta*) first (Article 5), then the general Priesthood of the baptized implied in the holy Christian Church as the *Versammlung aller Gläubigen/congregatio sanctorum* (Article 7). This is the order given by the Lord: His disciples are made by His disciples who are incumbents of the office of the holy Ministry (Matthew 28:16-20)—on that appointed mountain in Galilee these incumbents were

⁷“Obgleich uns in der hl. Schrift bezeugt wird, daß alle gläubige Christen Priester sind (1. Pet. 2,9. Offb. 1, 6. 5, 10.), so wird uns doch zugleich darin ausdrücklich gelehrt, daß es in der Kirche ein Amt zu lehren, zu weiden, zu regieren etc. gebe, welches die Christen vermöge ihres allgemeinen Christenberufes nicht haben. Denn also stehet geschrieben: „Sind sie alle Apostel? Sind sie alle Propheten? Sind sie alle Lehrer?“ etc. (1. Cor. 12, 29.) „Wie sollen sie aber predigen, wo sie nicht gesandt werden?“ (Röm. 10, 15.) „Liebe Brüder, unterwinde sich nicht jedermann Lehrer zu sein, und wisse, daß wir desto mehr Urtheil empfangen werden.“ (Jac. 3,1.), ibidem.

⁸ibidem.

⁹Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J.A. Bouman, trans., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), xvii; idem, *Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften*, Einführung in die evangelische Theologie, vol. 8 (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1948), 7: Insbesondere lautet ihr Anspruch, **verpflichtendes Vorbild aller kirchlichen Verkündigung und Lehre zu sein** [“In particular its title declares it **to be the binding pattern of all ecclesiastical proclamation and instruction**“; emphasis added].

concretely identified as the eleven apostles. This is not to say that one gift is more important or greater than the other, but that the Lord's constituting and ordering of them preserves each in its full salutary place in His Church.

It may further be stated that there are tasks of the office of the Holy Ministry given its incumbents to do by the Lord that He does not give to just any Christian. This truth has been opposed by those who speak of the acts of proclaiming the gospel and administering the sacraments as "rights" that are given to the general Priesthood of the baptized as individuals. It is then asserted that these individual Christians at their discretion cooperate with one another to see to it that these "rights" are exercised "publicly" in the Church according to good order. This "rights talk" that is asserted irrespective of the Lord's mandate and institution can become destructive in the words of Cyril Eastwood:

At the same time, it should not be forgotten that this revelation of grace which was made to Israel as a whole could be forfeited. It was forfeited when it was divorced from the righteousness of God and the corporate duty of Israel. Israel's mistake was in regarding it as a *right* instead of a *privilege*. Just because they thought the revelation was their right, they were able to think of it as something entirely independent of their attitude and conduct.¹⁰

This is a danger that attends any talk of rights in the Christian Church. All that we are and have are gifts from the Lord. The apostle Paul perceptively asks the staunchest Christian egalitarian: "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Corinthians. 4:7). This does not deny that the Lord gives honors and privileges to the individual Christian, but such honors and privileges do not warrant abrogating to one's self something not given to one by the Lord's mandate and institution.

The danger of this "rights talk" shows itself in the denial of the divine mandate and institution of the office of the Holy Ministry as an ecclesiastical position into which the Lord places qualified men by which they do things given them to do by Him. This view robs the office of the Holy Ministry of its essence as *His* gift thereby introducing doubt

¹⁰Cyril Eastwood, *The Royal Priesthood of the Faithful: An Investigation of the Doctrine from Biblical Times to the Reformation*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), 3 [emphasis added].

into the Church in the dispensing of His salutary gifts of word and sacrament. Such a view might be labeled “Functionalism” in that it acknowledges the office of the Holy Ministry only as the disembodied activities of proclaiming the gospel and administering the sacraments irrespective of someone doing it. It turns the Lord’s concrete gift into abstract floating functions to be performed by whomsoever. It is therefore necessary to establish the divinity of the mandate and institution of the office of the Holy Ministry as a position in the Church into which the Lord places qualified men to preach His gospel and deliver His sacraments.

THE DIVINE MANDATE AND INSTITUTION OF THE OFFICE OF THE HOLY MINISTRY

John 20:21-23.

The Lord established the office of the Holy Ministry in the forty days between His Resurrection and Ascension. Specifically, on the first Easter Sunday in the evening He appeared in the midst of His apostles—Thomas being absent—assembled in the upper room. The dominical mandate is direct, succinct, and clear: “ ‘Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent (ἀπέσταλκέν) Me, even so I am sending (πέμπω) you.’ And after He said this, He breathed [upon] and says to them: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit; whosever sins you may forgive, they are forgiven them, whosever [sins] you may retain are retained’ ” (John 20:21b-23).

It is somewhat unclear whether there were more “disciples” present than the twelve apostles sans Judas and Thomas, but in reference to verse 24 it is understood that the evangelist wishes to emphasize that it was the ten apostles that were present. These men the Lord commissions in the same way in which He was commissioned by the Father.

In the way of a *Shaliach*: a “plenipotentiary”¹¹ ambassador, authorized to dispense the word of His grace to His Church and the world.

The Lord hereby placed His apostles in the order of the office of giving Holy Absolution to any of His sheep who would in time to come confess their sins to them as their pastors. Holy Absolution by synecdoche carries with it the other means of grace: proclamation of the word of the gospel and administration of the sacraments. These means of grace simply deliver the same forgiveness that is offered in Holy Absolution. This mandate and institution is a further confirmation of the Lord’s pre-death and resurrection mandate and institution of the “Office of the Keys” (Matthew 16:17-19 and 18:18). It is specifically holy Absolution that the Lord identifies as “keys of the kingdom of heaven” (τὰς κλεῖδας τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν). This is pointed out in the Smalcald Articles: “The keys are an office and power, given by Christ to the church, to bind and to loose sins”¹² This statement from the *norma normata* identifies this divinely mandated institution as an office (*Ampt*).

Matthew 28:16-20

Where the Johannine mandate and institution passage was slightly unclear as to the composition of the Lord’s hearers the Matthean mandate and institution leaves no doubt that it is limited to the eleven apostles: “And the *eleven* disciples went into the Galilee, onto the mountain, which Jesus appointed for them, and when they saw Him, they prostrated [themselves], but some doubted. And when Jesus came He said to them, ‘All

¹¹H. Armin Moellering quotes Joachim Jeremias in *Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, Dritter Band, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938), 750: “Transferral of the keys is accordingly installation into the position of plenipotentiary [*Einsetzung zum Bevollmaechtigten*].” H. Armin Moellering, “Some New Testament Aspects of the Ministry Identified and Applied,” *Concordia Journal* 14 (July 1988) 3:236.

¹²*BKS* 452.8-9: Die Schlüssel sind ein Ampt und Gewalt, der Kirchen von Christo gegeben, zu binden und zu lösen die Sünde, nicht allein die groben und wohlbekannten Sünde, sondern auch die subtilen, heimlichen, die Gott allein erkennt, wie geschrieben stehet: “Wer kennet wieviel er feilet?” Und Paulus Röm. 7 klagt selbs “daß er mit dem Fleisch diene dem Gesetz der Sünde.” Tappert reads „function“ for „Ampt“ (*BC* 311.1)!

authority in heaven and upon earth was given to Me. Therefore, when you have gone, disciple all the Gentiles/nations by baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep everything that I bid you; and see! I am with you all the days until the completion of the age' ” (emphasis added). The mandate for those whom the Lord placed into the apostolic office is to reach out to a wider field than the lost sheep of the house of Israel to whom He limited them before His death and resurrection (Matt. 10:6).

The Lord according to His human nature has been given all authority in heaven and on earth—the Father has delivered to His Son the “can do” of all divine authority by which He in turn delivers His mandate to the eleven apostles as the “who do,” who are given all nations as the “to whom do.” The “what do” is the Office of the Holy Ministry, which is represented by Holy Baptism and the teaching of the holy gospel. Edmund Schlink enunciates the concern of the baptismal mandate:

The concern is in every respect with the whole: “*All* authority” has been given Jesus, “*all* nations” are to be made His disciples, “*all*” that Jesus has commanded [sic] is to be taught and observed, and Jesus will be with His people “*all* the days until the close of the age.”¹³

THE GENERAL PRIESTHOOD

The general priesthood of the baptized denotes a relationship between the believer and God rather than an office of service into which God places the believer. For the believer it denotes the spiritual nature that is a gift to him from the Lord, who is Himself “a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (Psalm 110:4). The locus classicus/sedes doctrinae is 1 Peter 2:5-9, but it should be noted that this passage is an apostolic construction rather than a divine mandate and institution: “and you yourselves

¹³Edmund Schlink, *The Doctrine of Baptism*, Herbert J.A. Bouman, trans., (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 9.

as living stones be built as a spiritual house into a holy priesthood (ἱεράτευμα ἅγιον) to offer spiritual sacrifices well-pleasing to God through Jesus Christ; for it stands in Scripture: ‘See! [I am laying] in Zion a chosen, precious cornerstone,’ and the one believing on Him may never be put to shame. Therefore, for you who believe is the honor; but for those who disbelieve: ‘[the] stone, which those building rejected, has become the head of the corner’ and [the] stone of stumbling and rock of offense’; they are stumbling since they are disobedient to the word, to which they were also appointed; **but you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood (βασιλείον ἱεράτευμα), a holy nation, a people for {God’s own} possessing, so that you may declare the praises of the One who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light**; once you [were] not a people, but now [you are the] people of God, who were not shown mercy, but now shown mercy.” Luther, ever the champion of this doctrine, puts it this way in his mature reflections on Psalm 110:3 (“After Your victory Your people will willingly make sacrifice to you in holy adornment”):

Here the prophet applies the priestly office and adornment to the Christians, the people of the New Testament. He says that their worship of God is to consist in the beautiful and glorious priesthood of those who are always in the presence of God and perform nothing but holy sacrifices. He endows them with the highest divine reputation and honor, for there is no greater name or honor before God and men than to be a priest. A priest is the kind of person whose proper office it is to deal with God, to be closest to God, and to be concerned with nothing but divine things. Here he confers this honor, I say, upon all Christians; for they are the true priests who stand before God in their precious and beautiful adornment and serve Him with a true and holy service.¹⁴

As God’s people they are to properly use the gift of the Office of the Holy Ministry that has been given to them by Christ by seeing to it that it is filled:

¹⁴AE 13, 294; WA 41, 153.25-32, 154.20-22: Solch Priesterlich ampt und schmuck zeucht und beutet hie der Prophet auff die Christen odder des Newen Testaments volck. Und sagt, das ir Gottes dienst sol ein schön, herrlich Priesterthumb sein als dere, die da imer fur Gott stehen und eitel heilige opffer thun. Und rhümet sie mit dem höchsten Göttlichen rhum und ehre. Denn fur Gott und den menchen kein höher name und ehre ist denn ein Priester sein, Welches ist ein solche person und ampt, so eigentlich mit Gott handelt und Gott am nehesten ist und mit eitel Göttlichen sachen umgehet. Solche ehre (sage ich) gibt er hie allen Christen, das sie als die rechten Priester kostlich und schon geschmückt fur Gott stehen und im dienen mit rechtem, heiligen Gottes dienst.

For wherever the church exists, the right to administer the Gospel also exists, the right to administer the Gospel also exists. wherefore it is necessary for the church to retain the right of calling, electing, and ordaining ministers.¹⁵

An examination of the Scriptures and the Confessions demonstrate that the Lord has given the Office of the Holy Ministry to the church as a package rather than as disconnected functions. “. . . Apart from its incumbents the sacred ministry is an abstraction”;¹⁶ hence, without incumbents it is not carried out in a manner so as to remove the doubt inherent to abstraction.

The Transference Theory (Übertragungslehre) finds no divine mandate nor mention in either scripture or the Lutheran confessions, which is a necessary corollary to the view that the delivery of the means of grace are given immediately to every Christian—for if the administering of the means of grace are given by the Lord to each individual Christian, they in turn must transfer this to one that they choose to do what each of them has a right to do in order to preserve order. Since there is no transference, there can be no immediate impartation of the delivery of the means of grace to the individual believer. The motive behind this view is to jealously guard the dignity of the “royal priesthood,” but it’s consequence is the intrusion of doubt at the delivery of the means of grace to Christ’s sheep. We can be thankful that this teaching is not biblical as there is no certain word from the Lord that mandates and institutes it.

The most fervent advocate of this teaching John Schaller turns the Lord’s mandate and institution into a commandment of the law that destroys the evangelical character of the Office of the Holy Ministry:

Someone will now immediately object, with a semblance of right, that Christ’s commission would then have been superfluous [e.g. Matt. 28:19-20]. But this objection does not take into consideration the fact that the things which God desires, for which he created his Christians, and which for Christians are

¹⁵Nam ubicunque est ecclesia, ibi est jus administrandi evangelii. Quare necesse est ecclesiam retinere jus vocandi, eligendi et ordinandi ministros (*BKS*, 491.3-7; *BC*, 331.67).

¹⁶Piepkorn, *ibidem*, 103.

obvious without any further divine commands, are by no means always done as they should be done unless Christians are instructed concerning them and reminded of them. In his state of innocence Adam needed no directions how to serve God and his neighbor properly; it was not even necessary to remind him of this. His concreated perfection guaranteed that he by nature knew and did everything that God wanted. but ever since the fall into sin each Christian must learn day after day what God's will is. Since also that which he has once learned ever and again disappears from his consciousness, he must continually be reminded of it. His sinfulness, moreover, continually hinders him from fully carrying out what he knows is God's will, and so he constantly needs the stern admonition not to let his flesh rule over him.

Christ knew this about his own on earth. He did not, therefore, want to leave them in ignorance of the fact that the gospel as the word of redemption which embraces all men was also intended for all men and that, consequently, the preaching of the word should resound throughout the earth wherever men live. They should realize that the impulse of their hearts to proclaim the gospel with their lips corresponds exactly to his will, that he has prepared them for this good work, and that this really is the light that they should let shine. **And when their sluggish flesh shrinks from the effort and sacrifice, they should hold this up to their old Adam as a command of God so that their flesh is struck down and permits the impulse of the Spirit in them to have free course.**¹⁷

A NECESSARY REVISION

Without pinning the efficacy of the means of grace on the validity or legitimacy of the standing of any incumbent of the office of the holy Ministry, the locus on the holy Ministry catechetically and systematically could be dealt with immediately with the loci on the means of grace. The means of grace would then be subsumed under the locus on the office of the holy Ministry. This method would avoid the presentation of holy Baptism, holy Absolution, and holy Communion as disembodied functions in the church ready to be picked up by whomsoever gets a fancy to pick them up. Each of the means of grace individually carries with them the entire Office of the Holy Ministry because each of them offer one and the same thing: the forgiveness of sins and life through Jesus Christ. The

¹⁷John Schaller, "The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry," Roger Fleming, Mark Jeske, and Daniel Schaller, trans., *Our Great Heritage*, Lyle W. Lange and G. Jerome Albrecht, eds. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991) 3:477 [emphasis added].

ministers of Christ are the instrumenta secunda who deliver the instrumenta prima (the means of grace) to the people of God. Both together constitute the church.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that both dominical gifts of ministerial office and general priesthood can be confessed together at the expense of neither. An infringement of either of them destroys evangelical certainty that comes from the Lord. In the case of emergency any Christian may administer Holy Baptism and may apply the universal grace of the holy gospel to the individual in extremis, but this does not imply that the functions of the Office of the Holy Ministry have been given immediately by the Lord to the individual Christian.

Both the Office of the Holy Ministry and the General Priesthood of all the baptized are jewels in the doctrine of our Savior that we as His called and ordained ministers are to adorn with “a holy life and conversation.”¹⁸ They are best displayed as the jewels they are when they are allowed to be presented strictly as they are presented in the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. This should be the continuing task of servants of the Word.

¹⁸*The Lutheran Agenda*, 107.

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